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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000083

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND ABDEL MEHDI DISCUSS NEW STRATEGY,
IRAN, AND THE MODERATE FRONT

REF: BAGHDAD 38 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi stated his support for the new strategy for securing Baghdad in a January 8 meeting with the Ambassador. His offered only one suggestion after hearing the Ambassador's brief preview, namely that additional forces and attention be paid to Diyala as well as Anbar and Bagdad (Note: PM Maliki made the same suggestion in a separate January 8 meeting. End Note). On Iran, Abdel Mehdi argued that it was necessary to work with Quds Force commander Qassem Suelimani because he is "influential." He claimed to have spoken strongly to Suleimani against Iranian-sponsored targeting of coalition forces. The Ambassador said that the Quds Force officers recently detained in Baghdad were clearly not playing a helpful role in Iraq and argued that the Quds Force, while a normal interlocutor for Iraqi opposition figures during the Saddam regime, was no longer an appropriate interlocutor for a state to state relationship. End Summary.

New Plan for Baghdad Security

¶2. (S) The Ambassador offered Abdel Mehdi a short preview of the new U.S. strategy resulting from the President's review. He emphasized that the most important finding of this review was the continued recognition that Iraq was vital to U.S. interests and that the U.S. must succeed in Iraq. He noted to Abdel Mehdi the commitments Prime Minister Maliki had made to President Bush on the new plan for Baghdad security, namely that anyone who breaks the law would be a target; that the commander for Baghdad would have full authority and not be subject to political interference; and that operations would continue until the job was done. The Ambassador also described the three necessary characteristics for the Baghdad commander: proper experience; broad acceptability; and ability to work with coalition forces. Abdel Mehdi noted his approval; his only comment was that additional forces and attention should be paid to Diyala as well as Anbar and Bagdad (Note: PM Maliki made the same suggestion in a separate January 8 meeting. End Note).

The Quds Force: An Acceptable Interlocutor?

¶3. (S) Joking that if Talabani made any invitations to visit Iraq during his upcoming trip to Damascus the Syrian visitors might end up getting detained, Abdel Mehdi turned the conversation to the Iranian detainee episode (reftel). Talabani, Abdel Mehdi claimed, had invited the Iranians to Iraq "to help stop criminal acts because they have influence

over JAM." The Ambassador noted that while it was normal that Iraqi opposition figures had relationships with Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani during the Saddam regime, the Quds Force was no longer an appropriate interlocutor for Iraqi leaders. There is no doubt, the Ambassador told Abdel Mehdi, that the Quds Force is killing Americans in Iraq and undermining the country's stability. The Ambassador noted that the Iraqi government did not want to see Iran and the U.S. fighting in Iraq, and that neither did the U.S.

However, if Iran continued to escalate by causing more coalition deaths through explosively formed projectiles (EFPs), the Ambassador continued, the U.S. would escalate as well.

¶4. (S) Abdel Mehdi argued that Iraqi leaders had to work with Suleimani because "he is influential, and you need to work with influential people to build good relationships." He said that Iraqi leaders were making a "very strong argument" to Suleimani that Iranian-facilitated targeting of coalition forces in Iraq had to stop and that they were "ruining" Iraq by their acts. The Ambassador replied that it was clear that the purpose of the Iranians' visit was not to stop JAM from criminal activities. He said that the operations had uncovered some disturbing evidence about Badr as well that was still being processed. He promised Abdel Mehdi that he would return for a frank conversation about this evidence.

The "Moderate Front"

¶5. (S) The Ambassador asked Abdel Mehdi about the status of the "moderate front." Abdel Mehdi said that before going on

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the hajj he had discussed a proposed press statement with Prime Minister Maliki, who had appeared enthusiastic and promised to bring Dawa on board, and with IIP leader Tarik al-Hashemi, who was also "convinced." Abdel Mehdi said that he later heard that Dawa had not supported the idea and that the IIP also had doubts. The Ambassador urged Abdel Mehdi to continue to pursue the idea, even if it turned into a "virtual front" rather than a publicly recognized coalition. He noted that the idea of a group of moderates had particular resonance with President Bush, who saw the key struggle in the region as that between moderates and extremists. Abdel Mehdi agreed, saying that this sort of grouping was "the future of Iraq."

Shooting Incident

¶6. (SBU) The Ambassador offered Abdel Mehdi his personal condolences for the death of one of Abdel Mehdi's guards on December 24 in a shooting incident apparently involving an employee of a security company that is a contractor to the Embassy. The Ambassador assured Abdel Mehdi that the U.S. took the incident extremely seriously, was undertaking an investigation, and was reviewing jurisdiction, and that the Embassy was working with the company in question to achieve an adequate offer of compensation. Abdel Mehdi said that justice was even more important than compensation, noting that Iraqis would not understand how a foreigner could kill an Iraqi and return a free man to his own country. He said that he had tried to keep the issue from the public eye and had not disclosed to the press the nationality of the suspect.

KHALILZAD